

Russia: Concern about growing influence of undemocratic forces

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WASHINGTON - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent and bipartisan federal agency, wrote to President George Bush urging him to raise U.S. concerns about threats to religious freedom and democracy in Russia during his June 1 meeting with President Vladimir Putin. In its new report on Russia, the USCIRF has found there is a real threat to religious freedom and democracy in Russia, and highlights how intolerant forces have used Russia's religious policy to attempt to label Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and others as threats to Russia's national security. The Commission is particularly concerned that many of the religious freedom problems in Russia appear to be directly related to the increasing influence of authoritarian strains in the Russian government. USCIRF Chair Felice D. Gaer remarked, "Because freedom of religion in Russia is fragile, we must be concerned about the increasing influence of authoritarian strains in the Russian government." In her letter to President Bush, she cautioned, "As the United States and Russia continue to develop a partnership on many important issues, concerns about democracy and human rights should remain an integral aspect of that relationship. Now is not the time to reduce U.S. vigilance on democratic progress in Russia." Because of concerns about worsening religious freedom in Russia, the Commission traveled there in January 2003. The Commission concluded that the handling of religious freedom problems in Russia is an important benchmark of progress on human rights overall. The text of the letter follows: Dear President Bush: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom respectfully urges you to raise the issue of the fragile state of religious freedom in Russia during your upcoming meeting with President Putin. In its newly issued report, the Commission has found that there is a real threat to religious freedom and democracy in the country. The Commission's report highlights how intolerant forces have used Russia's religious policy to attempt to label several religious groups, including Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and others, as threats to national security. We respectfully request that you urge the Russian government to take an active role in protecting religious minorities from violations by local and regional officials, as well as from violent attacks by extremist groups. Our visit to the country convinced us that the handling of religious freedom problems in Russia is an important benchmark of progress on human rights overall. Other disquieting events include a recent conspicuous increase in the number of clergy and other religious workers denied visas or residency permits, even in cases of previous long-term residency in Russia; evidence of government meddling in the internal affairs of certain religious communities; the continued occurrence of anti-Semitic attacks; a recent increase in violence against Muslims; and indications that the Russian Orthodox Church is gaining influence as the favored church, resulting in various discriminatory practices against members of other religions. Many of the religious freedom problems in Russia appear to be directly related to the increasing influence of authoritarian strains within the Russian government. Despite the progress made since the fall of the Soviet state, democracy is still relatively new to Russia, and continued progress toward democratic reform based on rule of law and the protection of human rights, including religious freedom, remains uncertain. Because of concerns about worsening religious freedom in Russia, the Commission traveled there in January 2003 to examine the situation first hand by meeting with key Russian government officials, religious leaders, and human rights organizations. The Commission's findings and recommendations can be found in the attached report. In it, the Commission recommends that the U.S. government should:-- raise concern about the growing influence of undemocratic forces on Russian government policies and oppose any attempts to rollback religious freedom; ensure in particular that the views expressed in the leaked December 2002 "Zorin report" - about the threat to national security posed by Catholics, Protestants, new religions, and Islam - are not adopted as Russian government policy; urge protection of religious minorities in Russia, including Jews and Muslims, against violent attacks and intolerance; ensure that any special role for the Orthodox Church or any other community does not result in violations of the rights of or discrimination against members of other religious groups; urge the Russian government to cease the practice of unfairly denying visas or residency permits to foreign clergy and other religious workers; monitor the actions of regional and local officials who interfere with freedom of religion and belief, and bring local laws and regulations on religious activities into conformity with the Russian Constitution and international human rights standards; and remain vigilant on the progress of democratic reform and protections for human rights in Russia and make greater efforts to support those who advance democracy, religious freedom, and other human rights in Russia. Mr. President, given Russia's importance in the community of nations, now is clearly not the time to reduce U.S. vigilance on democratic progress in Russia. As the United States and Russia continue to develop a partnership on many important issues, concerns about democracy and human rights should remain an integral aspect of that relationship. On behalf of the Commission, I therefore urge you to continue to press President Putin on the importance of maintaining his government's stated commitment to international norms with respect to human rights, including religious freedom. Sincerely, Felice D. Gaer Chair

Felice D. Gaer, Chair

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